



Examining perceptions of middle school students and their educators about their service-learning experiences

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Summary

This phenomenological study was designed to discover how rural, middle school youth and their educators who experience service-learning projects perceive their effects to be on their school and community lives. The study describes: (a) how youth, their educators, and community partners who experience service learning perceive its effects on themselves, their schools, and their community lives, and (b) how professional development opportunities need to be structured in order to encourage high quality civics education instruction.

This study relied heavily upon in-depth interviews of nine middle school students, six middle school educators, and one community partner. This study explored the perceptions and experiences of rural middle school students and their educators around service-learning projects and explored the following research questions:

1. What are the effects of service-learning projects on rural middle school students?
2. How do service-learning experiences impact students' views of their roles in schools and society?
3. What kinds of professional-development opportunities will educators need to effectively engage their students in high-quality service-learning projects?

This study uses two theories as its conceptual framework: Dewey's Theory of Democracy and Constructivist Learning Theory. The findings suggest that rural middle school students, their educators, and community partners shared a common definition of service-learning, in which the following four defining qualities emerged: authentic needs are met; learning is applied outside of the classroom; academic knowledge and skills are learned; and civic learning/volunteerism is embedded in the experience.

Findings from this study support the need for ample opportunities for youth to engage in democratic experiences, practice citizenship skills, and enhance these lifelong skills in ways that empower youth to make a positive difference in their communities. Effective civic education programs are needed to ensure that schools are fulfilling the civic missions of public education.

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